



THE NET

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MORTON WAS TO LEARN MORE OF THE MAN WITH THE INHUMAN SMILE WHO CAME ABOARD THE OLD HOOKER MAKING HER WAY IN THE CHINA SEAS. A DRAMA OF VENGEANCE, CRUELTY, POWERFUL HUMAN EMOTIONS AND THE NET OF FATE WAS TO BE PLAYED OUT ON HER SUN WARPED DECKS AS SHE SLIPPED ALONG OVER DESERTED TROPIC SEAS

MORTON first saw Crane and his curious follower outside the imposing palace of the governor-general. Morton, who was leaving Tonkin next day, was taking a snapshot of the tremendous building—a bit of the Champs Elysées set down here in Annam, and enormously out of place, too.

He noticed the sardonic, rather seedy white man with his nearly naked attendant—a tall, stalwart Annamite who might have been a fisherman by his looks. A queer couple. The natives, staring at the palace, made a remark in French.

"It looks like a falling net."

The white man laughed, his gaze going to the tremendous splay-sided shell or canopy of glass over the entrance. Morton, too, glanced at the thing, and smiled. This monstrosity of French civilization in contrast with the waving banners of the Annamese and Chinese streets.

The two others passed on. The white man gave Morton one swift, incisive glance, and it was a thing to remember. However, Morton thought no more of the odd pair for that day, nor ever reckoned to see them again.

He did see the white man next morning, however, and met him to boot.

The *Fei Wen*—a wallowing old tub scarce justifying this name of "Light-flying Swallow"—was to sail at noon. Morton was enjoying an after-breakfast pipe in the hotel veranda when Captain Bray dropped in with word that the stuff was all safely aboard. This was his excuse. In reality, the fishy-eyed, bleak-nosed skipper was making a final effort to wangle a bit of help out of Morton for his own private graft, and Morton knew it.

Morton's position was a bit exceptional. An ethnologist, emissary in Annam of an American museum, he had secured a very fair collection from the up-country tribes—everything from weapons to seeds—and the French lent him every aid and courtesy. The *Fei Wen* had no business taking passengers at all, but Morton had a letter from a slant-eyed millionaire in Hong Kong who owned this and other coasters, and that made all the difference.

Bray sat down, puffed, accepted a drink and lighted a cheroot. He was a stooped, wide-shouldered man. His rather weary, washed-out blue eyes held a sharp glint at

times, but he had the air of being oppressed by life.

"Now, then," he said carefully, after disposing of his errand, "I'm not the man to argue off a decision, Mr. Morton. Once a thing is done with, that ends it. But touching the matter I mentioned to you day before yesterday—well, certain things have come about, putting a new light on it. I hope, since you're an open-minded man, I may broach them."

MORTON glanced around, saw they were quite alone. He was not irritated; rather, he felt a vast contempt for the man across the table from him. Morton, who was in his late thirties, had seen a good bit of the world and had studied more of it, and regarded such things with tolerant and dispassionate detachment. Captain Bray was a rascal, but that was nothing against him in Morton's sight; given the necessity, most men were rascals.

"Thanks for the compliment," he said, a flicker of amusement in his steady gray eyes. "I appreciate your confidence in my discretion. Go ahead."

Bray nodded. He took himself very seriously, and this was the chief thing Morton had against him.

"Well, I know one or two people here, and my mate, Mr. Chambers, knows one or two," he said. "When I got orders at S'pore to pick up the Manila cargo here I didn't know you'd be along. We arranged with a chap here to give us two suitcases of the stuff, and paid by cable. Now we find he's been put in the cooler. His wife has the stuff for us, but can't get it aboard. Nor can we. The French are watching things mighty close, Mr. Morton, and for some reason or other seem to have their eye on us."

Morton repressed a smile at this naive confession. It was true that the French kept a close eye on the opium traffic. Since the big scandal broke in Paris regarding the administration here, every official had been on his toes.

"We can get the stuff, but we can't get our money back," proceeded the skipper plaintively. "Nor can we get the stuff aboard—it's remarkable how every man

jack of us is watched! We've got to open every parcel we bring down to the quay, and the mere hint of a bribe makes those frogs throw their hands in the air and chatter. Now, as one white man to another, would you see us lose all that money? We're not rich. We can't afford it. All you got to do is let those two suitcases go aboard with your stuff, which won't be examined. You don't have to do a thing."

Morton tamped down his pipe reflectively.

"My dear Captain Bray," he said, "I'm sorry for you and Mr. Chambers. You're in a hole, and from what I know of the price of opium, an expensive hole. As I've previously made clear to you, I have no high moral sentiments in the matter; whatever may be my private view of dope traffickers, it's immaterial to me how much of the stuff gets on the market or how soon dope fiends smoke themselves into Elysium."

Captain Bray dimly perceived irony in this, and his fishy eyes narrowed.

"I don't get your point," he said with some asperity. "You'd see white men lose out?"

"Are you referring to the color of skins or of souls?" asked Morton smoothly. "But to the point, as you request. It's very simple. The government here have accepted my inventory of my things without examination; they have waived formalities, treating me with magnificent courtesy. For this very reason, it's impossible to add your suitcases to mine."

"But they wouldn't know it, even!" said the skipper.

Morton smiled. "That's why. Over your head? Nonsense! But it's quite settled, so we may dismiss any further argument. Besides, I have to finish packing and get my grips aboard——"

IT WAS here that Crane appeared, just as a dark flush came on the skipper's face. Crane came striding up the steps, saw them, and approached.

"Cap'n Bray?" he asked in a quiet, restrained voice. "Heard you'd come here, and came for a word with you, if you can spare a moment. My name's Crane."

Captain Bray gazed up at the visitor. Crane had features not distinguished in any way, not singled out by any particular oddity; they were regular and rather gave him the air of a cleric, with their thin-nostrilled touch of asceticism. His eyes were remarkable, but Morton, watching him, could not tell why. They were cruel eyes, he fancied, yet level and queerly piercing.

"Yes?" said Bray, almost grudgingly, as he ran his eye over the seedy garments. "What you want of me?"

"I hear the *Fei Yen* is going direct to Manila," said Crane. "I want to go on her."

"No," said Bray curtly. "Don't take passengers."

"But you're taking passengers," said Crane. "A Mr. Morton—this is he, perhaps?"

Morton, for no reason except Bray's churlishness, rose and held out his hand, and indicated a chair.

"Yes. Glad to meet you. Sit down—have something?"

Crane gave him a swift, firm grip, shook his head to the question, and took the chair.

"Can't take passengers," said the skipper. "Mr. Morton's a scientist, a friend of the owners. Makes it different."

"Yes?" said Crane. He got out a cigarette and lighted it. "There are two of us. Mien is a native—very useful. You can put him in the black gang. I'll pay my passage, of course."

"Look here! I've told you already——" began the skipper, then stopped abruptly, and stared at Crane with a puzzled air.

"If you'd give me a moment in private," said Crane, "I might be able to convince you that I'd make a good passenger, cap'n."

"In private?" Bray flushed angrily. "I've got no secrets Mr. Morton or anybody else can't hear, and you needn't try any bribery either. By the lord—I've placed you! You're the chap who was at Pak-hoi a while back, got mixed up in that opium scandal, and went to prison for it! Busted ship's officer, weren't you? Some talk about being a pirate, too, but no proof. The blasted cheek of you, com-

ing to me! Ex-convict like you! Nothing doing."

CRANE, to the surprise of Morton, took all this with an air of sardonic coolness.

"Well, well," he returned easily, "I haven't denied my record, have I? But I s'pose it does irk you to associate with an ex-convict and so forth."

"Yes, it does," said the skipper flatly, and with entire seriousness. "I couldn't afford it, not with my position. And besides, I don't hold with crooks. We don't need to mince bones about it, I guess. Out here in these waters, a white man's got to go straight or else he'd better go native and be done with it."

"There's some truth in that," agreed Crane gently. He looked up, met the twinkle in Morton's eye, and smiled. Morton had a startling impression, as though beneath this smile were terrible things. It jerked him up, made him watch Crane more closely, as the other now addressed him. "You wouldn't have offered me that drink if you'd known—eh?"

Morton took the pipe from his mouth.

"Why not?" he asked. "I never saw a pirate before."

Crane chuckled. "Well, I'm going to show you that Cap'n Bray's bark is worse than his bite," he returned. "You see, this honest skipper of ours, when it comes down to hard tacks, won't go back on another white man." Morton could not repress a keen amusement at this throwing back of Bray's argument on himself. Crane continued, while the skipper glowered at him. "—especially out in this country. You see, Cap'n Bray has a very soft heart under his bluster, Mr. Morton. A very soft heart! When it comes to charity and good works, his right hand never knows what his left hand does. Eh, cap'n?"

Bray growled something about blasted flattery. He did not see, as Morton began to see, a frightful and merciless irony creeping into Crane's words and tone. He perceived it sharply enough an instant later.

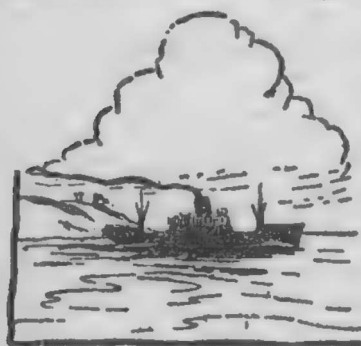
"You see, Mr. Morton, this good seaman of ours is very tender beneath his

outer crust. Why, I've heard tell that up in Pak-hoi, when he and his chief officer were appealed to by a poor French girl in trouble, who had only a native woman for friend, they——"

Captain Bray's washed-out blue eyes widened, and at the same instant all the color in his face seemed to flow away, leaving the bronzed skin a queer mottled gray.

"That's a damned lie!" he exclaimed sharply.

Crane glanced at him in surprise. "Oh, not at all, cap'n! Not at all. I heard how you helped them away on the *Fei Yen*; it was really most generous of you, since the authorities were trying hard to locate that



girl. You ran big risks to help her. And you landed her and the native woman safe in Singapore later, I hear. Yes, that was a generous deed,

cap'n. Two years ago, wasn't it?"

"Yes, S'pore," muttered Captain Bray. The mottled hue had vanished and his face was nearly normal now, but the cheroot had cracked and broken in his fingers. "Never mind all that—so you want passage, huh?"

Crane smiled at Morton. "I told you he was kind-hearted! Yes, for myself. For Mien, a berth somewhere. He's a useful hand. He was in prison with me, cap'n. He speaks French very well."

"I'll manage it." Captain Bray was breathing heavily. "Get aboard before noon—I can fix it all right."

"Thank you," said Crane. "I was sure you could. Your ship is beautifully named, cap'n—Light-flying Swallow! Did you ever hear who the real *Fei Yen* was? She was an Imperial favorite a long time ago, when Chang Ngan was the capital of China; the most famous beauty of all times, a regular Helen of the Orient. But they didn't name her 'Taker'—that's the meaning of the Greek beauty's name, you know—they called her Light-flying Swallow, because of her dancing. She was a magnificent dancer, they say. Of course

it wasn't what we would call dancing—like a French girl would dance, for instance——"

Crane's voice died away politely, for Captain Bray had risen and was dabbing sweat off his forehead with his handkerchief.

"No time for this gabble," said the skipper. "You'll be aboard, then? All right. Mr. Morton, I'll send two men up for your luggage in an hour—suit you? Good. See you later, gentlemen."

He took up his cap and departed.

Crane rose. "I'll be off, too. Glad to have met you, Mr. Morton. See you aboard."

Crane strode off, unhurried. Morton gazed after him and, down the street, thought a second figure joined his—a nearly naked, bronzed Annamite figure.

"Queer!" thought Morton, reflecting on the scene and what was behind it. "Black-mail? Perhaps. Bray helped that girl clear, Crane knew of it—hm! Perhaps. Bray isn't that sort, though; he's a hypocrite, a cold-hearted rascal, a pretty devil in man's shape. Crane—well, Crane——"

He could not make up his mind about Crane.

II

NOON had sounded. The steamwinches were rattling and clanking, and the *Fei Yen* was about to haul out. She was not pretty, but this was not entirely her fault; a man with half an eye could see that her officers were a slovenly lot.

Morton stood at the rail, watching a native craft swinging out into the tide and go slipping away before the wind, her three sails bellied out. A quiet voice at his elbow, and he glanced over his shoulder to see Crane there, also looking at the craft.

"Remarkable grace about her, eh?" said Crane. "Half junk, half prau—these Annamese coasters have the best features of each. She seems to glide over the water rather than pass through it."

"What's the crowd over there at the wharf?" asked Morton, pointing to a long, low dock at one side, where a throng of natives and Chinese were gathered. Crane

stared, and then a low, queer laugh came to his lips.

"Moving picture chap—that fisherman is performing for him. Ever see it done? Then watch! It's a marvel. You never saw anything to equal it, except a stage magician. Watch!"

Morton watched. A camera-man on the wharf, turning his crank; beyond him, over the water, a motionless bronze figure—a native fisherman. In his hand the native held a coiled net—apparently a small one. He stood for an instant, statuesque in the sunlight. Then, so suddenly that the eye could scarce realize it, the whole bronze body seemed to contort in a muscular ripple. The net flew out, spread in a perfect circle fifteen feet in diameter on the water's surface, and settled from sight. The native drew it in, slowly.

"Poorly done," said Crane. "He was slow about it."

"Slow?" exclaimed Morton. "Man, the thing was like a flash!"

Crane smiled. In his eyes Morton surprised that odd cruel glitter noted previously.

"A delayed flash, then. You'd see it better done out among the islands, where it's an art. Well, see you later! Must slick up a bit for luncheon. You haven't met the officers yet? It'll be a pleasure to remember."

Morton frowned after the slender, graceful figure. More irony! A queer man. Well, any man would be queer after doing time in a French jail out here.

A HALF-HOUR later, going down to the mess-call, Morton met the officers. Captain Bray performed the introductions, then went back to the bridge, where the pilot was taking the ship out. His manner to both Morton and Crane was cheerful, as though he had forgotten how one had refused to help him run opium, and how the other was an ex-convict. Morton rather thought he had somehow contrived to get the opium aboard after all.

So far as the officers were concerned, one and all had abandoned shore-clothes with the blast of the whistle, and wore pajamas at best. Mr. Chambers, the mate

and partner of the skipper in the dope business, was a sheer brute—powerful blue-jowled, heavy of jaw and hard of eye. He was, obviously, the efficient driving force aboard the old hooker.

The second officer was nominally an Englishman, sufficiently so to let the *Fei Yen* answer the board requirements at Hong Kong. His name was Smithers. He had sandy, nearly colorless hair, which gave him the appearance of being without eyelashes, a dusky skin and odd frightened dark eyes. His face was weak, his mouth very bad, and whenever he opened his lips he vented a chuckling obscenity which would have won him honors in Sodom and Gomorrah. Morton put him down as the product of a Cockney father and Japanese mother.

The chief engineer, Maquorrie, and his assistant, Saunders, were on extremely bad terms with the bridge staff. Maquorrie was a grizzled, bleary-eyed, unshaven old man; his assistant was unclean in more ways than one, and matched the second officer's ribaldry with an aggressive flood of billingsgate appalling to hear. Morton gathered that Mr. Chambers had infringed upon the rights of the old chief, and bad blood had risen between the two shipboard authorities. It was certainly at danger-



point now. From the unchecked comments of Mr. Smithers, the whole crowd had apparently plumbed the depths of dissipation in Tonkin, and everybody was at a keen edge.

The presence of the two passengers caused a nominal restraint and prevented trouble. Once or twice Morton surprised upon the face of Crane that same flicker of a cold and cruel smile as the man regarded those around; insensibly, before this first meal was over, Crane and the mate together were dominating the table.

Captain Bray had blabbed—even Morton could see it, as they shook hands with Crane, eyed him, glanced one at another.

Half way through the meal, indeed, Smithers became emboldened by the atmosphere of familiarity his general obscenity induced, and gave Crane a leer and a grinningly offensive word.

"Ain't you the chap who piled up the *Emily Jane* near Zamboanga four-five years back? And been enjoying French hospitality lately?"

At this direct insult, there was a growling oath from the others

"Shut your damned mouth," snapped Maquorrie. Crane, however, merely gave Smithers a level look, not at all unpleasant or angered.

"Why, yes," he said. "And you, if I mistake not, are the gentleman who cut the throat of a woman in Pak-hoi two years ago?"

Morton was slow to credit the frightful accusation as sober earnest, but he was swift enough to read the truth in Smithers' distended eyes and livid lips. There was a tense silence for a moment, then the second officer forced a smile.

"Lor' bli'me, if you ain't ready with the comeback!" he said, and that was all. All, except the one look of distilled venom his lidless eyes shot at Crane.

MORTON presently sought the deck and watched the receding mountains of Annam with a singular sense of oppression. The yellow men working about the decks were far and away cleaner company than the rascally pack of officers, he thought; and he looked forward to the succeeding meals aboard the *Fei Yen* with something very like distaste.

Not that company or environment mattered much to Morton. He had plenty of work to keep him busy, and was impervious to distasteful surroundings. In fact, he began to laugh at the mess-table gang, once the hot afternoon sunlight had cleaned out his brain, and in the cool rush of wind he came back to his usual poised self. Yet something lingered—something he could not explain.

Oddly enough, it was nothing he had noticed at the moment, and only now did it come back to him. Not the exchange of courtesies between the chief and the after-guard, not the startling repartee between

Crane and the second officer, not the looks or the words or comments of the others. Just the way Crane had smiled when introduced to Mr. Chambers, the burly mate—that queer, inhuman smile! Crane had smiled the same way at the skipper, on the hotel veranda. Crane had smiled the same way at the portal of the governor's palace, when the native said it looked like a net.

What did this smile mean?

"Waiting!" Morton's brain flashed to the meaning suddenly. "Waiting—for what? Here's a mystery—or do I imagine it all?"

THERE was little enough comfort for passengers aboard the old *Fei Yen*, but there were two or three unbroken Singapore chairs, and Captain Bray had rigged a flapping sort of awning abaft the bridge and chart-house. Morton got Wang, the steward, to take a small table up there. With his notebooks and pencils and brain, he had plenty to do, and was left to himself for a time.

Later in the afternoon the mate and two naked saffron men from forward came into sight, the men unlash the tarpaulins over each lifeboat, while Mr. Chambers made an inspection of the regulation Board of Trade contents, from sail to stores, and substituted a keg here, a box there. When it was finished, he came over to Morton, dropped into a chair, let the cool breeze blow upon his hairy chest, and lighted a cigarette.

"I'm the only seaman aboard this here blasted craft o' perdition," he said profanely. "Didn't get anything stole at Tonkin, anyhow, but I'm takin' no chances. Bray's got a bottle on the bridge—blast his dirty old soul, I expect he wants to forget things! He's a soft 'un, he is."

"Doesn't look soft," said Morton, amused, studying the brute.

"What's rotten is allus soft," said Mr. Chambers profoundly. "You're a scientific chap—why is it, huh? Apple or mango or man, don't make no difference."

"Decomposition," said Morton. "It's merely a chemical change, Mr. Chambers—an organic change. Whether in the fibers of an orange, or in the moral fibers of a

man, it's the same thing."

"Huh!" Mr. Chambers scowled, dark eyes glittering from beneath shaggy brows. A long shadow fell across the deck between them, but neither man noticed. "Huh! I s'pose death is the same thing, huh? Worms—it all comes to worms, huh? Well, there's more'n one man aboard here got worms in him, lemme tell you! Yep, I guess death's the same thing."

The shadow lengthened, spoke, and Morton looked up to see Crane there, smiling.

"No, no, Mr. Chambers," said Crane in his level, restrained voice. "Death is not the same thing at all. It's the same thing so far as the body's concerned—but when the heart stops, something leaves the body. Something goes out of it that worms can't touch, that dissolution can't affect, something invisible and beyond comprehension. And that's death."

"Huh!" said Mr. Chambers, looking up with a sidelong glance. "I know what you're driving at—preachers' talk, huh? Soul! That's all bosh, same as heaven and hell. You can't hand me that sort o' slaver. Don't believe it. Nobody else does neither. You ask Morton, here—he's a bug-hunter. He knows better."

CRANE took the third chair, stretched out easily, yet carefully, as though—as though waiting, it seemed to Morton. Odd fancy! Amused, Morton eyed the other two. Crane was mouthing a cheroot critically, before lighting it. Mr. Chambers stared at the horizon and his squat, heavy fingers played with one of the gorgeous buttons of his pajamas.

They were very gorgeous, those buttons, and caught Morton's eye. Strange contrast, gold and lapis buttons and cheap cotton cloth! An impossible thing in any town, but quite possible here aboard ship, where Mr. Chambers had his washing done by the steward and so could indulge his fancy for expensive trimmings.

Crane glanced at the mate, looked for a moment at those gold and lapis buttons, and Morton could have sworn that in this instant the man's eyes flickered as though from some swift and intolerable anguish. Then Crane smiled and turned.

"Well, Morton, how about it? You're a

scientist, so back up Mr. Chambers with sound reason in his denial of heaven and hell."

Morton laughed. "Unfortunately, I can't," he said. "My little fund of science tells me there's something everywhere I can't understand."

"Bah!" growled the mate, giving him a scornful look. "Twanging harps and shoveling coal—huh! What factory turns out them harps, huh? Where's the devil's coal come from?"

"You don't get me," said Morton. "As you said, Crane, there's something that escapes from the body. And hell or heaven is the condition of that something, I think. Call it a state of mind. Call it what you like. But what matter? We'll learn some day."

"Oh, hell!" said Mr. Chambers, and heaved up his hairy bulk. "You chaps can talk it out all day if you want. I know what I know—there ain't any such bunk."

"Those are fine buttons of yours," said Crane. "Chinese work?"

"Huh, them?" Mr. Chambers twiddled a button in his fingers and inspected it as



though for the first time. "I dunno. Found 'em in a bazar up to Canton. Well, see you later."

"Wait!" said Crane. His voice leaped out suddenly, sharply, and the mate turned about in surprise. But Crane was smiling up at him. "Don't you know what those buttons are? Where they came from?"

"Huh?" Mr. Chambers scowled, and Morton was aware of a deep-flaring menace in his gaze, and perhaps a hint of fear as well. "Huh? What you mean?"

"Why, there's a native story," said Crane easily, "about a set of buttons like those. I don't know the details. Something about a native woman, very highly born, and a splendid set of gold and lapis buttons denoting her rank. I heard a lot of talk about it while I was in that up-country jail of theirs."

"You did?" said the mate, staring down at Crane and fingering the button. "You

did?" He paused. He seemed fascinated by the story. "What was it?"

Crane squinted out at the horizon. "Hm! Hard to recall it now—seems to me this princess or whatever she was had got into some sort of a fuss with the authorities, and skipped out, and tried to get out of the country but drowned herself. Her body was recognized by the buttons, if I remember rightly."

"Huh!" said Mr. Chambers, and looked down with conscious pride at his ornaments. "Well, these ain't the ones, sure. Reckon I've had these all of three-four years now—and they couldn't ha' got from there up to Canton, huh? Lots o' buttons in the world."

"I'll give you an English sovereign for one of them," said Crane. "For a souvenir."

"You will?" Chambers stared at him again, and grinned suddenly. "Done. I got two-tree extry ones anyhow. Done with you, here and now!"

His powerful fingers twisted one of the buttons around and around. It came loose, and he held it out. Crane motioned Morton to take it—he was trying to extricate the coin from his trousers' pocket. He pulled out the gold coin and Mr. Chambers pouched it with a grin.

MORTON examined the button. It was certainly handsome, being a stud of true lapis set in Chinese-worked gold. He glanced up, and saw that the mate had disappeared. Crane shook his head as Morton extended the button; the man's face was, of a sudden, all wet with sweat.

"No—wait," he said. "Do you read Chinese, Morton?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"You think I'm a fool to pay five dollars for that thing? Well, it's worth a good deal more than that price—not intrinsically. Upon it hangs the life of more than one man. I've gambled carefully for this bit of evidence, Morton; more carefully than you'd ever believe. I've gambled with time, with money, with careful planning. Upon what you're about to tell me, depends success or failure."

Morton frowned slightly. For an in-

stant he wondered if Crane were a bit off—then he knew better. For Crane was smiling at him—that same terrible thin smile with its hint of inhumanity, of merciless precision. And under that smile Morton felt a tingle of fear.

"Look at the back of the button," said Crane. "If it's an ordinary button, nothing is there—and I lose. If it's the button of that native woman I told Mr. Chambers about, it will bear two very tiny Chinese ideograms—and I win."

Morton held up the button and looked it over. He shook his head, then frowned and looked more closely. Sure enough, he saw two very small ideograms, beautifully chased in the gold.

"You win," he said, and held out the button.

Crane took it and stuffed it into a pocket, then relaxed in his chair. He opened his mouth and exhaled a deep breath, gazing out at the sky and sea. When his eyes came back to Morton, a flame was kindled in them. The hint of sardonic mockery was clear fled out of his face; it had become resolute, hard, bitter hard.

"I lied to Mr. Chambers about that native woman," he said softly.

Morton gave him a casual look. "You seem to have a lot of information handy today about native girls," he said. "And I'm sorry to see you're beginning to take yourself very seriously. I thought you had more sense."

Crane looked astonished, then broke into a laugh, got out a fresh cigarette, lighted it. Amusement wrinkled the bronzed cheeks about his eyes.

"I like you, Morton!" he exclaimed. "Sensible—that's the word for you. Dead right, too; I musn't take myself seriously or I'd go mad. Would you like to hear about that native woman?"

"Very much," said Morton, looking at him.

"Good. She was the native ruler of a little up-country state in the hills. A white man was there with his wife—just married. She was a French girl. He had located some very good sapphire ground and was taking out stones. The French got wind of it and came down on the place

like a ton of brick. The princess got into a whale of a row with them, and a French officer slapped her face. Oh, yes, the French do that sometimes—you know the life of a Frenchwoman of the lower classes, don't you?

"Well, the princess took some of her jewels and skipped out. She went with the white man and his wife, who had to skip also. They took their sapphires as well.



out of it."

Crane paused, and puffed at his cigarette for a long moment, his eyes narrowed at the horizon.

While the man spoke, Morton had a twinge of memory. Where was it he had heard of a French girl and a native woman—why, in connection with Captain Bray, of course! Bray had taken them aboard at Pak-hoi and had landed them at Singapore. That was what Crane had blackmailed the skipper with—forced him to grant passage. Was this some other fact of the same story? Very likely.

"The three of them got to Pak-hoi all right," pursued Crane, cocking up his feet comfortably. "But the white man was clear out of it with fever, and his wife was down with it, too. They had to keep clear of the authorities, of course, and the princess, who had only one man with her, did not speak French and was pretty well up against it. However, a ship was in the harbor bound for Singapore, a tramp steamer, and she heard it was a ship from Hong Kong, and she knew all Englishmen were good men. So she went to the skipper of the ship, she and the man who served her, showed him their jewels, and asked for passage to Singapore. She gave him one of the jewels, and he agreed."

Crane paused again, and seemed rather uneasy for a moment.

"I remember now you mentioned it to Bray," put in Morton, but the other seemed not to hear the words.

"This sea captain, this bluff, honest, good English soul," Crane went on, "saw no earthly reason why he should not benefit from the situation in more ways than one. He and his chief officer put their heads together. They got the four fugitives safe aboard—the white man was delirious, the French girl, his wife, was little better. The two women were given one cabin, the white man another. That night they knocked the native chap in the head and dropped him over-side, and took the white man ashore. It was not difficult to rig up a charge against him and make it stick; they hired a few gentlemen to attend to it, and make sure the white man would go to prison for a good safe term. At midnight they hoisted the hook and left Pak-hoi with their loot of women and jewels."

MORTON was startled by this turn to the story, and somewhat incredulous. He did not put such an action past Captain Bray, but the thing seemed impossible.

"Bray said," he put in quietly, "that he had taken the French woman to Singapore."

"No, I said that—he agreed, in much relief," and once more Crane, turning his face full to Morton, smiled his queerly inhuman smile. "Mr. Chambers agreed, in much relief that the native woman, the princess, had been found drowned. In actual fact, neither of these things happened. The French girl never reached Singapore, nor did the princess ever show up again."

Morton stirred restlessly.

"I'm not protesting the story—I know nothing about it—but it hardly sounds very logical," he objected. "That the white man should be clapped into prison, for example."

"Read life, my dear chap, is it ever logical?" and Crane laughed curtly, sharply. "He was going under a French name at the time. It reality, he was an American ne'er-do-well, an adventurer, who had previously been sentenced at Pak-hoi for smuggling opium and had escaped from prison up-country. He was not a good

man at all, but he did love that French girl, and had married her. These two honest seamen knew nothing about him, thought him a Frenchman, in fact, and did not go near him on account of his fever. They never even clapped eyes on him! But when the French got their hands on him, they jugged him right. It goes to show how those two honest seamen fell into luck without knowing it."

"Hm!" said Morton, thoughtfully. "You knew the man in prison?"

"Yes." Crane looked out at the horizon, and fell silent.

"Well," said Morton at last, when he felt the silence awkward, "what's the rest of the story? What happened to the two women—French girl and princess?"

"Nobody knows. I fancy Bray took the French girl, and Mr. Chambers the princess—our good chief officer is not particular as to color. Of course, this is only guesswork. Since neither of the women showed up at Singapore and had vanished on the voyage, and since neither was of the type to accept undesired love, it may be taken for granted that they committed suicide. This, at least, is the kindest solution."

Crane fell silent again, a sombre quality in his voice at the final words. Morton stirred a little.

"Look here, man—is this a fairy tale? Or do you know these things to be true?"

Crane held up the button, taking it from his pocket.

"What more do you need? There's the evidence."

"You say it is. There may be dozens of buttons like this."

"No. Specially made. However——"

"And," broke in Morton, uneasy before all the bald stark ugliness of it, "you say this happened a couple of years ago. If these two men ever hauled in a fortune in stones, would they stick right along on this old ship? Not much. They'd clear out, dissipate it, invest it—do something with it!"

REAL amusement wrinkled Crane's eyes.

"Logic! Well, that's true. But they didn't get the jewels. The French girl had

her husband's sapphires, and the princess her own stuff. Those women either hid the jewels here aboard, where they've never been found, or else chucked 'em over the rail, once they got on to the skipper's game. They were that kind, Morton. Shall we look-see? If we found the stuff, I expect that'd be the best sort of evidence, wouldn't it?"

Morton was silent for a moment, staring at Crane. Those words showed him something.

"Are you looking for evidence?" he demanded bluntly.

Crane shrugged. "No. I don't need it. I'm amusing myself, that's all."

"With what end in view?" snapped Morton. Crane gave him a slow look, half sardonic, and the man's face had become masked.

"Oh, mere distraction—passing the time! By the way, you have the cabin of those two women—suppose you look around. You're intelligent. Neither Bray nor Chambers have any imagination. Find those jewels. Might give you something to think about. Well, see you later."

Crane rose lithely and strode away.

III

TWO days passed, in which Morton saw very little of Crane.

The story Crane had told grew and grew in his mind, with his daily and hourly contacts with the officers of the ship. Captain Bray might be drinking, but did not show it. Mr. Smithers continued his obscene comments, and seemed to have all sorts of startling information as to the private life of his colleagues, nor were his jests resented. In this happy give-and-take came out hints here, a word and a look there, which touched upon the women sometimes carried unofficially by the *Fei Yen*.

Morton, usually so impassive to any such external things, found it all reaching into him. Talking with Bray, he would discover himself thinking about that French girl. Across the table, the brutish blue jowl of Mr. Chambers would remind him of a slim brown native woman who preferred death to shame. The chuckling comments of Mr. Smithers would strive in his

mind for some double meaning, some connection with the story—and once or twice he found it beyond any doubt.

On the third day out, early in the morning, there was trouble. How it started, Morton never learned—the causes went far back and deep. The finish was a mad conflict on the forward well-deck between Mr. Chambers and Saunders, the assistant engineer. The mate, blood running down his face from a clip with a spanner, bent Saunders back across the hatch-cover and hammered him, and Saunders died



that night of a broken back. Old Maquorrie cursed the after-guard with flaming and terrible blasphemy and threatened to have them all up in court, but the

skipper took him below and drowned his anger in liquor.

At the burial of Saunders, next morning, Morton for the first time caught a full sight of the native, Mien, who had come aboard with Crane, entering the black gang. Mien stood at the rail, watching the body go over as Captain Bray read the service; naked, tall, straight as an arrow magnificently powerful in every muscle and line. The man's eyes were ugly and smoldering, and Morton was startled by their vicious look.

However, there were other things to ponder. Morton wondered much about Crane, about where Crane came in on the story and why Crane was interesting himself in the lapis button and the evidence in general, but the more Morton thought of the whole thing, the more he became impressed with the possibility of finding the jewels.

He cared nothing about them as jewels, and less about their probable value. If they were here, however, they would stamp Crane's story true; the incredible would become the proven. About this possibility hovered the horrible fascination which invariably lingers around a gruesome mystery. Had this skipper, this mate, calmly going about their duties, actually done

these things? Possible enough. Mr. Chambers was no more worried over the broken back of Saunders than if he had killed a fly. But then, that was hot-blooded fight. This other was cold, deliberate inhumanity, cruelty planned for gain and lust.

SO MORTON, intermittently, began to look about his cabin. He began, in fact, soon after his talk with Crane, but did not go into it very earnestly until the following day. That night after he saw Saunders' back broken, he was stirred, his imagination was at work, he sat down and concentrated on the thing. After all, it must be simple—if true! Or was it all a wild-goose-flutter? Had those women been here in the cabin?

Then he remembered that Crane had not seen the reverse of the lapis button until after asking about the two ideograms. This was a bit startling.

Morton looked around. He had already searched, vainly enough, everything in the two-berth cabin. Granted the story was true, then; either the jewels had gone out through the port, or they were here. Where? Where could a woman hide such things? Where might they lie for two years undiscovered? The cabin was bare enough. Steel walls, iron berths, two old gray life-jackets in the rack overhead—not a hiding place of any kind visible! Then the jewels must have gone out the port, to keep them from falling into the hands of the fishy-eyed skipper and the burly mate.

Perhaps—and yet—Morton's glance roved around. What had he overlooked? What, so simple, so impossible, that men of no imagination would pass it by? Where, undisturbed and undiscovered during two years?

He rose and locked the door. Then, standing on the berth, he searched for crannies in the wall, searched the rack of the life-jackets, found nothing, no place of hiding. He was folding the life-jackets to replace them, when he halted abruptly. Two of them lay there side by side on the berth—what was that hint of red against the canvas of one? The other did not match it. He looked closer and saw one of the seams sewn with red thread, red

silk thread. The other was not, certainly——

Morton got out his knife and ripped open the seam of the life-jacket, got his fingers into the powdery cork within, felt a hard object. In two minutes he had the thing wide open. Out across his bunk spilled a dozen hard little bluish polished pebbles—were they sapphires, then? No matter. With them were other things—stones in fragments of their mountings. Pearls, a diamond, several rubies, jade, three necklaces of pearls and two of fine deep green jade, not the poor light article of commerce but old and valuable jade.

Morton stared at them all, then gathered them up and put them into his pocket. The fact hammered at his brain, hammered remorselessly at him. The blood of women was on these stones, the crimes of men—lust and gain! Their value was nothing to him. He saw only the greater and more important thing. Evidence!

A KNOCK sounded at his door. Swiftly, he turned over the ripped life-jacket, flung the second above it, and opened the door. Captain Bray came in, genial and friendly, a breath of liquor on his lips.

"Well, are you getting settled, Mr. Morton? Sorry I haven't had much time to give you so far—papers, you know, details, charts and so on," he said. "Are you comfortable here? Anything we can do for you?"

"Oh, everything's fine, thanks," said Morton, and wondered why.

"I dropped in to see if maybe you'd splice the main brace with me," said the skipper. "As a matter of fact, that business down for'ard got on my nerves—poor Saunders! My officers have been with the ship for years, most of them——" He produced a bottle, and laid it on the table. Then he saw the life jackets, and his eyes widened on them. "What's the matter? Afraid we're going to strike an iceberg?"

"Trying the things on," said Morton uneasily conscious of the spilled cork-powder.

Captain Bray said nothing more. In this fleeting quarter-minute, however, the color of his face changed. His eyes narrowed slightly, and took on an unguessed preda-

tory expression; his large nose tautened and quivered.

The drink, the discussion of Saunders' death, was mechanical. Presently Captain Bray departed with his bottle, and seemed glad to get away, as though something inside were hurrying him, spurring him off. Barely had Morton settled down over his pipe when Wang knocked at his door and came in, staggering under a load. He brought a brace of white and shiny new life-jackets, and word that new ones were being issued out to all the cabins to replace the old jackets.

Morton let him take the old ones away, fold and place the new ones in the rack, without comment. In this ten minutes before his pipe was lighted, he had worked. The canvas was sewed up. None the less, he knew they would know. "They"! Morton, for once, was conscious of a criminal guilt. The stones in his pocket weighed down his conscience. What should he do about it? No doubt now, no doubt whatever!

"They" would know he had found the stuff. He could fancy the skipper and Mr. Chambers over a bottle, glaring, cursing their own bad luck, their own vain searches. After two years! The stones lying there all the while in the most conspicuous and yet the most inconspicuous of all places, under their very noses, unseen and unguessed! Perhaps they had even poked around in those same life-jackets, without ever seeing the tiny glint of red silk thread!

THEN poise returned, gradually working back, and Morton laughed whimsically again as he thought of it all. What matter if they did know? They would glare at him, and not dare breathe a word. And what would he do about it? He did not want the cursed stones, the price of blood. Well, wait and see! He got out his notebooks and worked late, but when he turned in, he locked the door and left the key in the lock.

He wondered, next morning, how they would look, and to his surprise they looked just as usual; neither skipper nor mate seemed to have any ulterior thought when they regarded him. He could not

imagine the least thing in the exchange of words at breakfast, and cast his half-worry aside. There was the burial to be attended to, and much talk of Saunders and past dissipation ashore, and old Maquorrie with senile tears on his eyelids.

Morton did not see Crane at the burial service, but he saw Mien there among the other men, and it seemed to him that this brown native, distinct from the yellow Chinese, was more of a man than these others who stood around while the skipper prayed and assumed a gravity they did not feel.

Under the makeshift awning on the bridge-deck, he found Crane sitting.

"You didn't attend the ceremony?" he asked, dropping into a chair. Crane looked at him briefly, sardonically.

"Let the dead bury their dead," he said, and no less bitter than the words was the inhuman smile touching his lips and not his eyes.

Morton fumbled for a cigarette; he was tired of his pipe.

"What a blast in those contemptuous words!" he said, though he had not meant to voice the thought. Crane looked a trifle startled.

"Eh? Well, I suppose so. I've no use for the gang. They've no use for me, but they're a bit afraid of me."

"Why?" questioned Morton. He lighted his cigarette, and wondered how he would get around to the weighty subject in his pocket, what he would say about the stones.

"They know my record." Crane laughed frankly now, in real amusement.



"You see, they know I lost my master's ticket for piling up a ship. They know I went to prison for dope-running in Pak-hoi. But—" He hesitated here, dwell-

ing on the word with a certain relish, a deepening of his amusement.

"But—but!" and he laughed again.

"You see, Morton, they don't know a thing more about me! They don't know where I've been the past two or three years, they don't know what name I was under, they don't know one solitary blessed thing! And how they'd jump if they did know!"

"You're a queer man," said Morton reflectively. "I've seldom met a man I couldn't understand, but I don't savvy you a bit, Crane. I would, perhaps, if I knew all that lay behind you, behind your presence here this minute. No, no—I'm not inquiring; I don't mean it that way. I was thinking out loud. This white man whom you knew in prison, the one they sent there—what was his name?"

"Delattre," said Crane. "A French name he had taken."

"You hate this crowd for what they did to him. Then why come on this ship?"

Crane gave him a slow, cruel look. "You'll know that soon enough. My one worry is about you, Morton—you're a man. A clean man. I like you."

"Eh?" Morton frowned at him. "And I worry you?"

Crane flung out his hand with a laugh, dismissing the query.

"Let it go! We'll find a way. Done any looking around for that evidence?"

Morton nodded. "Yes. Do you know what the stuff was? Did Delattre describe it?"

Crane looked at him for a moment.

MENTAL suggestion is a queer thing. Perhaps the recent burial had quickened brain and nerves, perhaps not. Morton, in this look, knew suddenly, without words, that his question had given him away, had told his secret to Crane. He could not read it in Crane's face at all—he just felt it inwardly, knew it with absolute conviction.

"Why, yes," said Crane in a low voice. "There were three chains of very fine pearls, belonging to the princess, with a diamond, one or two rubies, and some odds and ends—all heirlooms. Worth a lot. Delattre had about a dozen sapphires, I understand; uncut stones, but picked for quality. I suppose the lot would be worth a pretty large sum, Morton."

"Is Delattre alive?"

Crane's head jerked assent.

"Yes. I'm the only one who knows where he is, who he is, what his story is."

"Then——" Morton hesitated, but his brain drove him on. Crane knew. Crane had the inventory of those stones down pat. There was no longer any possible doubt about the crime of two years ago. "Then—in case the stones were found——"

"They belong to Delattre," said Crane incisively, curtly. For an instant he was silent, then added, "Not that Delattre would want them or keep them. The price of blood, or his wife's blood—no, no! He's a queer sentimental sort, Delattre. He'd fling the things into the ocean rather than keep them or profit by them, even if he was starving. You can understand that."

"Yes," said Morton. "Yes. I'd feel the same way. Here, you'd better take them."

Crane watching him, without any surprise, he scooped the stones out of his pocket and extended them, in both hands. Crane took them and put them in his lap, without the least visible emotion.

"Found them, eh? Where?"

"Sewed into a life-jacket. The last place anyone would look."

CRANE laid both hands over the stones and stared out at the horizon. Morton watched him. The man was absolutely impassive, did not move a muscle, did not so much as move his eyes; he stared at some point on the skyline, unseeing. He was seeing something not there at all, something no one else could see. And, as the bronze of his face slowly whitened and died into pallor, Morton's brain hammered and clicked again. He knew exactly what the man was seeing, out there on the whitish blue sky-line above the sea, knew as clearly as though he himself were seeing it.

Crane was looking at the two women locked in their cabin, desperate, facing death and lust, sewing those jewels into the life-jacket. And Morton did not disturb this mental vision.

Mr. Chambers disturbed it. In pajamas and sneaks, the burly mate bore down on them and grinned. Crane did not move at all—his hands quite concealed the jewels.

"Well, Dad Maquorrie has got to work double now," said the mate. "Real powerful prayer the skipper put up, huh? You two gents still talking about death and hell?"

Crane looked up, gave the mate a full, deliberate regard.

"Do you know how the Annamese catch fish, Mr. Chambers?"

"Huh?" said the mate. "Catch fish? Same as everybody else, I reckon. Why?"

"No. A different way. You'll know one of these days." And Crane turned back to contemplate the horizon once more. Somehow, in this cold, deliberate regard, Mr. Chambers had been stirred and touched, and showed it.

"By the lord, I think you're daft," he said, and went away again, growling.

Morton might have thought the same thing, and was tempted to think it still more, a moment later. For Crane uncovered the jewels in his lap, took up one pearl necklace, and put it in his pocket. Then, filling both hands with the stones, he rose from his seat, took a step to the rail—and flung them out into the ocean.

He stood there, his back to Morton, until the latter spoke, half rising, incredulous.

"Good lord! Crane—did you mean to do that?"

Crane looked at him, made a little gesture, started away, then turned, pausing.

"Wouldn't you, if you were me?" he said, and then went on, walking slowly away.

Morton sat in paralyzed comprehension, a little chill creeping up his spine.

IV

MORTON sat there until the noon mess-call, looking out at the sea, smoking, thinking, readjusting himself. He was no longer facing a quiet, peaceful crossing to Manila, but action—and very deadly action.

Crane, of course, was Delattre in person. Rather, had borrowed the name of Delattre for a time, under this name had met and wooed love and fortune—and lost all again, all and more. No one knew he had been Delattre, thus far. Morton mulled this over thoughtfully.

"Neither the skipper nor the mate know him for the fever-stricken Frenchman they sent to prison and robbed of everything," he reflected. "Hum! Is that possible? Perhaps. They'd been afraid of the sick man, afraid of contagion, had not looked at him, knew him as a Frenchman named Delattre. So they framed him, robbed him, knocked his native man on the head, and sailed off with his wife and the native princess. Now they've been talking with him every day, eating with him, living with him—and never knew it. My lord, what a situation!"

Comprehension beat in upon him, wave after wave; understanding of little things he had passed by unseeing at the time. He had never dreamed of Crane being that man, so fearfully and mortally injured by these two! Now he remembered that cruel, inhuman smile, and it lingered before his mental vision.

He could interpret the smile, with what he had just learned. He saw why Crane had come aboard this ship, why he had spent time, money, brains, toward this end. He could perceive why the lapis but-



ton had been one definite scrap of evidence, and why the jewels had completed the work, making this chain of evidence dam-

ning beyond all words. On and on came the waves of comprehension, reaching ever farther back—back to that morning on the hotel veranda where Crane had spoken of a French girl and Captain Bray had turned white as a sheet for an instant.

Bray had been afraid then—not of the French authorities, perhaps, as much as of something within himself. Remembrance? Conscience? Well, so much for Bray. It was far different with Mr. Chambers, who probably had neither regret nor conscience. And what did Crane intend to do?

Morton's reflections settled into a repetition of this mental query. What did Crane intend to do? Why had he come aboard here, bringing the stalwart native with him? Did he intend vengeance? Na-

turally, yes—but in what way? Evidence, this evidence which he had sought and then flung away—he could not bring Bray and Chambers to the gallows with it alone! What on earth did the man intend?

That he intended something, Morton was convinced.

The odd part of it, Morton recalled as the mess-call sounded, was that Crane had not flung the lapis button overboard, and had not flung all the jewels overboard, but had saved out one string of pearls. Why? This inconsistency loomed and bulked larger, until upon it Morton began to hang the other question—what did Crane intend?

He went down to mess hoping to find out, but failed. Crane was there, whimsical, sardonic, quiet as usual.

In the bursting light of this amazing discovery, Morton had temporarily forgotten his own share in the matter. Mr. Chambers had the deck, the skipper was presiding over the table; although he searched probingly enough, Morton could not unearth anything the least unusual in Captain Bray's words or attitude. Yet it flooded back on him how Bray must know he had the stones. What, then, did Bray intend? And did the mate know?

With a shrug, Morton forced away the whole thing, refusing to let it weigh further on his mind. He went back to his notebooks that afternoon and saw nothing of Crane.

THE watches were changed at eight bells, four o'clock. Aroused by the voices, the tramp of feet, Morton left the shade of the awning and went forward to the break of the bridge. Down on the forward well-deck, the watch just up from below, naked yellow men and one lean bronze figure, were hauling in buckets of water and sluicing it over themselves.

Off to one side, by the fore-castle head, Morton saw Crane standing, watching the men. Presently he saw Crane make a slight gesture. Mien, the bronzed Annamese, came over and joined him. For a space the two stood there talking, none near them. Crane put something in the hand of the brown man, took it back, tossed it over the rail. He put something else in the brown

hand, and Mien drew himself up. 'This other object, too, went over the rail, but as it went, Morton watched it, and saw a slender uncoiling line of white. The two men below separated.

Here was a new query, and a most puzzling one. He hesitated to broach the whole thing to Crane, shrank from it—yet, toward sunset, did just that. He was standing at the rail in the stern when Crane came along and halted, and Morton turned to him abruptly.

"Why?" he asked. "Why? I don't understand it. Why drag Mien into it?"

"Eh?" The gaze of Crane bored into him for a moment. "Oh! You saw me, did you? Yes, I remember you were at the bridge-rail. You don't miss much, by the lord you don't!"

Morton smiled. "Well, why save the pearls to show Mien?"

"So he would recognize them and the button. His brother was the native servant of the princess. Both of them were boys in the palace. Mien knew all those jewels by heart, every one of them. That was another link in the chain——" Crane broke off, uttered a short laugh, corrected himself. "Rather, another mesh in the net."

"The net of evidence?" said Morton. "Then you intend——"

He paused. Crane shook his head quietly.

"My friend, what I intend is strictly my own business—without offense. But I've been keeping my eyes open, Morton. I saw something this afternoon just before watches were changed. Bray and Chambers were at the port side of the bridge, looking back at you, and there was an odd look in the mate's face. Could Bray or Chambers, by any chance, suspect you had found those stones?"

Morton's brows lifted. "If they did—would it be another mesh in your net?"

"Naturally. If they suspected——"

"They don't suspect—they know," said Morton calmly.

HE TOLD of Bray's visit to his cabin the previous evening, of his conviction that Bray had guessed, of Wang's visit with the new life-jackets.

Crane squinted out at the water and

nodded slowly. "I expect they're on to you, right enough," he said. "I noticed Bray was smooth as butter to you this noon. Hm! They'll think you still have the stuff."

"Naturally they don't connect you with it," said Morton.

"Hm!" Crane scrutinized him. "I don't know about you. You're an aloof sort, Morton—watch things going on and hold out of it. If I intended to punish those swine myself——"

Morton smiled. "You? Punish them? When we get to Manila, you mean. Well——"

"I didn't mention Manila. The point is, is it any of your business?"

"No." Morton was tempted to parry, but gave honest answer. "I have no concern in it, of course. And I don't believe in personal vengeance. Oh, I'd be quick enough to knock a chap down—I mean other things——"

Crane broke into an amused laugh, a real laugh.

"My dear man," he said with just a hint of deep mockery, "you're too intellectual to lose your temper—and when you lose it, heaven help the other fellow! You don't believe in personal vengeance—from ignorance. You know nothing about it. Any idea of what vengeance means to a man is far from you. You should be a judge and sit on the bench to sentence criminals with whom you have nothing in common. Then, you're really too lazy to work up enthusiasm over anyone else's wrongs—you have your own work to do. You're incapable of hitting a man unless he slapped you across the face and stung you. You——"

"Just what's the idea of all this analysis?" put in Morton stiffly. He was a little red, feeling within himself that perhaps Crane was right. "What are you driving at?"

Crane reached out and tapped him on the breast.

"Just this," said he. "If you've got a gun, you dig it out and carry it—and watch your step!"

With this, Crane turned and strode away, leaving Morton very much confused.

"Confound the fellow!" he thought. "He rattles off character and motives like one of these imitation psychoanalysts who milk the innocent public—and yet I've half an idea he may be right. What of it? I'm not ashamed of myself or my character, and if he doesn't like it he can go to the devil. But carry a gun, eh? Nonsense; Not a word will ever be said by the skipper about those jewels. They might try to steal them—nothing more. Bah! There's nothing for me to worry over. The point is—what's going to happen? Crane and Mien had a purpose in coming aboard here, and they weren't looking for evidence either."

Here was the thing Morton was really worrying over, and now he faced it as he looked out at the white tumbling wake of the *Fei Yen*, faced it squarely. He was no fool. He



could see how everything had come to a focal point on Crane's words—"What business is it of yours?" This had really been a polite inquiry, not a brusque turning away.

Where did he stand, where must he stand? Morton put the question to himself and strove for honest answer. No blinking it—Crane and Mien were here for action. To put it in fantastic melodramatic fashion, for vengeance. And where did he stand? Must he stand motionless and look on? Crane meant killing, or worse, and was unhurried about it; his attitude gave that same singular appearance of waiting, waiting, as a cat watching a mouse!

"But where do I come in?" Morton demanded of himself. "Do I stand apart, detached, unconcerned, and let Bray and Chambers be killed? Warn them—no, that's unthinkable! They deserve all Crane can do, and more. Join Crane? No; that were insensate folly. It's none of my affairs. Yet it is my affair, from a standpoint of self-preservation! I want this ship to reach Manila, and I've no altruistic interest in seeing a pair of scoundrels receive their just deserts—particularly at my own expense. Hanged if I know what to do!"

HE WENT down to dinner, still wondering. The same unshaven faces, the same obscene jests, the same growls and oaths swirled about by the old-fashioned strumming electric fan. Not the same, though, for Saunders was missing.

For a moment, just after the second officer came in, Morton saw him glance at Crane. He started slightly with remembrance. Mr. Smithers had not forgotten, then! Morton remembered that Crane had spoken out before them all, asking who had cut the throat of a woman—had Mr. Smithers done this thing? In this one swift glance from the venomous lidless eyes, Morton had an awakening.

He began to see Crane in a new light, as it were, bathed in the glare of hatred from all sides. Bray and Chambers did not know him for Delattre, true, but they knew he was in some measure aware of the story of the two women—since this knowledge was responsible for his having got passage. They would fear and hate anyone who knew this story. Mr. Smithers was certainly not anxious to be published to the world as having cut a woman's throat; his darting eyes said as much, though his tongue dared no longer touch on Crane. Whose throat had this Eurasian cut? What dark story had Crane picked up in prison? No matter.

"I'm sick," groaned old Maquorrie in the middle of dinner. "I'm main sick, cap'n—I'll be gae'ing tae lie doon a bit, a wee bit——"

The old man rose, and his face was a livid gray. It was the heat down below, he said, and the good Lord must look after the engines, but they were in fair shape enough— So he went out, mumbling words that came to nothing. Captain Bray looked after him uneasily. Mr. Smithers caught the look and instantly pounced on the skipper, with a giggle.

"It always comes that way—less'n five days out!" he said with profane emphasis. "It always comes that way! Mr. Morton, I s'pose you know all about plague?"

"Shut your damned mouth, mister!" cried out the skipper in a burst of passion, his pale eyes opened wide at Smithers, and sudden choler purpled his cheeks. "I've had about enough of you and your ways.

Any more of your smart talk and——"

"And what?" demanded Mr. Smithers, as Captain Bray paused. His demand was impudent, cheeky, brazen. "And what, hey? What'll you do? Not a thing, and you know it. You dare to threaten me, and you know what!"

Watching them, Morton saw clear as a bell that Mr. Smithers had the whip-hand here. For all his bluster, the skipper was inwardly cringing before this threat. He sat silent, looking hard at the second mate, licking his lips, seeking words to save his dignity. He was helpless, afraid of the little man with the evil, lidless eyes.

THEN, abruptly, Crane's voice crackled upon the silence—drove out scathingly, sharp and bitter as acid, untouched with anger yet biting like a lash.

"What? Speak it out, you little devil! Think you know something on your captain, do you? Well, he knows something on you. He knows about that woman in the singsong house, savvy? He knows how you cut her throat and all about it."

Captain Bray evidently knew nothing at all—he jerked his head around and gave Crane a sharp look of astonished gratitude. Mr. Smithers did not see this, however. He, too, had turned upon Crane, his teeth showing in a snarl.

"What the hell you talking about?" he cried.

Crane sat there and smiled at him, and under the smile his soul crawled and his voice died. Then Captain Bray, who was sharp enough, perceived the chance afforded him to escape and seized it with both hands and a roaring voice.

"You this-and-that little Eurasian rat!" he bellowed profanely, pounding his fists on the table. "I've had enough o' your back talk. Aye, mister, I know all about that there girl. And you can take your choice—jump ship at Manila with your pay, or do your talking to the French consul there! Understand?"

Mr. Smithers seemed to retract into himself, to coil like a snake.

"You better look out—you and Chambers both!" he shot forth. All his anger turned from Crane to the skipper, yet his eyes were furtive and fear-filled. "You

know cursed well I can tell about them two women who killed themselves and why——"

"What's that to me, hey?" stormed Captain Bray. Obviously, he had now determined to rid himself of this incubus once and for all. Morton shrewdly suspected that Mr. Smithers had presumed on his knowledge ere this—probably had turned it to profit.

"Yes, mister, you go to Manila, and you go blasted quick!" proceeded the skipper boldly. "I've had enough o' you aboard this hooker, and now you're done. You and your talk about them women—all nonsense! A pack of cursed lies, and you ain't got a smidgeon o' proof to back 'em up. You just let me hear that you've done any talking about me or about this ship—understand? Just let me hear it!"

"Aye," said Mr. Smithers in sulky, wide-eyed fear.

Captain Bray leaned over the table. "Aye—what? Out with it, blast you! Learn some respect aboard here or I'll iron you this minute!"

"Aye, sir," replied Mr. Smithers, and blinked rapidly.

"As for your plague talk, that's nonsense too," went on Captain Bray, determined to assert himself to the full once he had taken the bit between his teeth. "The chief is done up wi' the heat. He ain't got a symptom o' plague. So keep your mouth shut from now on."

Mr. Smithers did so, but his eyes were eloquent of the fury in his heart, and when he met the deliberate smile of Crane, he shoved back his chair and left the table muttering. When he had gone, Captain Bray beamed genially at Crane.

"Well, sir, I owe you thanks for the tip," he said.

"Did he really cut a girl's throat?"

"He did," said Crane calmly. "He and another chap did it for her jewelry. The other man didn't



know Smithers by name, but described

him to me—we were in the same prison. Smithers had got away. When I saw him, I recognized the description at once. There you are."

"Any man who'd do a thing like that," said Morton, looking at the skipper, "ought to be disemboweled."

"Right you are, Mr. Morton," said Captain Bray warmly.

CRANE lighted a cheroot in the darkness. The reflected flame from his cupped hands gave his face an odd highlight, illumined it with an unguessed strength, mastery. Morton puffed at his pipe and looked out at the blazing stars and the white-tipped sea. The *Fei Yen* was shoving ahead through long rollers that made the stars swing, when one looked up at them.

"Our friend Mr. Smithers," and Crane uttered a soft laugh, "seems to have been doing a bit of blackmail. Didn't the skipper jump to get rid of him, though?"

"You inserted that remark very cleverly," said Morton. "Why? To make use of him?"

"To weave another mesh in the net—perhaps the last mesh," said Crane. "Now we've learned the fate of those two women, haven't we? That's why I did it, my friend."

"And what next?" asked Morton, though his pulse leaped with the query.

"How do I know?" said Crane, in a tone of surprise. "There's no hurry. It's amusing to watch and wait. Everything turns around you now, also; you're the pivotal point of the next little scene."

"I?" said Morton.

"Of course. You've been standing aside, looking on at my little game. Now I'm standing aside in the same detached way, and looking on at yours. I'm curious to see what'll happen, what Bray and Chambers are thinking of doing, how they'll try to get those stones from you. If they haven't searched your cabin yet——"

"My things were badly tumbled about today," said Morton. "So that was it, eh?"

"That was it. And now you'd best watch your step," said Crane.

Morton laughed amusedly. "Confound you! I'd wish you'd finish up your game,

whatever it is! I don't relish this a bit—it's interesting, fascinating, but I don't enjoy it."

"Well," said Crane, "I didn't make you find those stones and then tip off your hand to Bray, did I?"

With this he turned and walked away.

Morton was tempted to anger at this cool thrust, then it only added to his amusement. The subtle irony of Crane's words appealed to him. He appreciated the quiet, dominant way Crane was pulling string after string—literally enough to make up the meshes of his net.

And now, though he did not like it, he knew he had bungled that business of the jewels, and he must see it through. Despite himself, he was being dragged into the affair, while Crane stood off and watched with a sardonic grin.

THE watches were changed, Mr. Smithers taking over the deck from the mate. Morton was pacing up and down the bridge-deck, enjoying his pipe and the cool of the breeze and the swaying stars. At each turn aft, he could see the glow of a cheroot and a white shape down below, at the rail of the after well-deck; but he left Crane alone.

From the chart-house drifted sounds of a furious altercation. Captain Bray had come up. He and Mr. Chambers and Mr. Smithers were all three at it, to judge from the storm of oaths and imprecations, but what it was all about Morton did not know or care to know. Of a sudden the figure of Mr. Smithers appeared, glided past him, and vanished aft. A moment later Mr. Chambers came out to the side of the bridge, bawling after the second officer.

"Smithers! Come back here, blast your dirty soul—I want my dinner! You take the deck—where ye think we are, huh? On a railroad train? Get back here!"

Smithers had vanished, and made no response. Captain Bray stepped out and spoke to his furious mate.

"Go on," he said wearily. "I'll take the deck, mister. Go on."

Mr. Chambers crossed to the port ladder and descended. Captain Bray stood looking at Morton as the latter ap-

proached, and then spoke.

"That you, Mr. Morton? A fine evening, very! I suppose you heard this unfortunate scrimmage of tongues?"

"I heard the sounds of it, at least," said Morton. "We all have our troubles, I expect. How are we making the road to Manila?"

"Oh, fairly, fairly," said the skipper. "I hope Maquorrie will come about in the morning. None of these yellow devils know a thing about engines. The old man is in a bad way, though—his heart, I think. Know anything about such things?"

"Little," said Morton. "I—what's that?"

Both men turned, startled, senses taut. A wild, shrill cry came from somewhere below, a queerly panting, inarticulate cry. Then, as they listened, it burst into words.

"Chambers! He—he done for me—he done——"

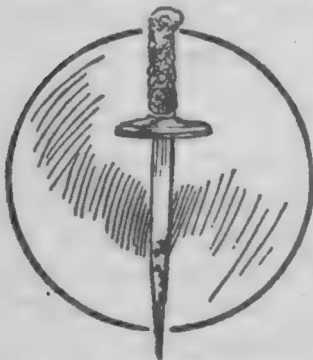
It fell silent abruptly.

"My good lord—that's Mr. Smithers' voice!" cried the skipper. "Come on, Mr. Morton!" Something's happened down there——"

Morton was already on the ladder, and Captain Bray almost on his shoulders. There at the ladder's foot, under a deck-light, lay the second officer on his back, dead. Blood was still streaming from a jagged, terrible wound across his left breast; and above him, knife in hand, stood Mr. Chambers.

The mate lifted his blue jowl as the other two approached.

"Here's a hell of a note!" he cried out. "Smithers comes along the port passage



hollering, and staggering like he was drunk, and then lets out a yell at me about some him—and there he is! Here's the knife——"

Abruptly, Mr. Chambers stood silent, his heavy voice dying out, as he looked from one to the other. Morton said nothing.

Captain Bray broke the silence. "It didn't sound that way, Mr. Chambers," he said in a quavering tone, as though he

must speak against his will. "Is he dead? Yes, yes. Dead enough, poor devil! It sounded like he said you had done for him, mister."

The mate was not a man of great imagination, but had already read the accusation in both their faces. Now he burst forth and swore a great oath, and held out the knife.

"It ain't so, it ain't!" he roared. "It's a cursed lie, I tell you! That ain't my knife—you know blasted well I don't carry any knife! It's like I said. I seen him running, and caught him, and there he is. I s'pose because we had that fuss up above you think it was me—but it ain't so, blast it! Don't be a durned fool, cap'n——"

"What's all this?" said a quiet voice, and Crane strode up along the passage from aft, and joined them. His voice shrilled as he saw the prostrate figure. "Eh? Murder? Who did it, Captain Bray?"

The skipper glanced around, saw one or two figures, and mopped his sweating face with a shirt-sleeve.

"For the love o' heaven shut up, all hands!" he exclaimed irritably. "Most of them chinks know English. Go down in my cabin, all of you—I'll be right along. Wang! Where the devil's that steward? Boy! Wang!"

"My come topside, cap'n," came the response, and Wang pattered up. The skipper ordered him to have the body of Mr. Smithers carried below and prepared for burial, then wiped his brow again and went below, and so to his own cabin.

Mr. Chambers sat there burly, scowling, furious at the whole affair and yet oddly dumb before the startling evidence damning him so clearly. Crane was chewing an unlighted cheroot, impassive, frowning a little as he looked at the reddened knife the mate had laid on the table. Morton glanced from one to the other, unable to balance fact against fact, unable to see where truth lay. Chambers must have done the murder; yet apparently no one remembered how Mr. Smithers had gone aft instead of descending at the break of the bridge.

"Well, gentlemen, this is a hell of a mess," said Captain Bray, his face mottled

and streaming perspiration. As he looked at the knife, his big nose quivered. "This has got to be logged. We can't get away from it. Mister," he said, as Chambers looked up, "mister, you keep quiet. I'm master o' this ship."

He cleared a space at the table, well away from the red knife, and got out his rough log, and sat down, Mr. Chambers was staring at him, hard.

"Somebody did this," said the skipper. "Maybe it was you, mister, maybe it was one of the hands. Nobody ever seen this knife before? Nor did I. Now, mister, speak your piece."

MR. CHAMBERS growled out his story without variation, and anger grew upon him against the unbelief all around. Morton thought his attitude rang true. He finished with a glare and another burst of gusty oaths. The skipper looked at Morton.

"You were with me, Mr. Morton. There's bound to be an inquiry about this," and he paused for an instant, wetting his lips, "unless—unless it's cleared up in the log. Did it look to you like Mr. Chambers had done it?"

"Yes," said Morton quietly.

"Blast you——" cried out Chambers, but the skipper silenced him.

"Did it look to you like Mr. Smithers said Chambers had done for him?"

"Not necessarily," said Morton. "The words might be so construed. On the other hand, they might refer to a third party—someone whom Mr. Chambers had seen running away, perhaps."

"Blast it, there wasn't no one else in sight!" growled the mate, glaring. Then he started. "But look here, cap'n! Mr. Smithers didn't go down the ladder ahead o' me—he went aft! Right past Mr. Morton!"

"Yes," said Morton.

To save his life he could not help a glance at Crane. The latter sat looking on, listening, a cynical lift to his brows, the slightest shadow of his inhuman and terrible smile touching his thin lips.

"What d'you know about it, Mr. Crane?" said the skipper. He seemed in difficulty, perplexed and troubled. His

breathing was laborious.

"I?" Crane shrugged. "I came up, saw Mr. Chambers there with the knife—that's all I could say about it. Very likely his story is true. I'd been down in the after well-deck. I think you saw me down there, Morton?"

"Yes," said Morton.

"Blast it!" said the skipper fervently. "If you didn't do it, mister—and I don't think you'd lie to me—then one o' the hands done it. If I put down this sort of a yarn, there'll be an inquiry sure. And I got to log it, mister. Here's two witnesses."

MR. CHAMBERS looked from one to the other of the witnesses. His scowling gaze spoke tacitly but very clearly. His eyes said he wished most devoutly both of those witnesses were out of the way. Under Crane's smile of comprehension, blood rushed to his face.

"Blast you, all of you!" he exclaimed, and came to his feet. "I want some dinner. If I'd knifed that red-haired fool, I'd ha' done it proper, without all this monkey-work! And you can take it or leave it in your blasted log."

He stamped out. Captain Bray wiped his face, and left his pencil untouched. Crane fumbled for matches and lighted his cheroot.

"You're up against it, cap'n," he said, as though he enjoyed the words. "Mr. Chambers may be an old shipmate and all that, but it looks bad. It'll look worse if you don't log what happened, and do it tonight. Tomorrow you can look for the owner of that knife among the crew."

"I hadn't thought o' that." The skipper brightened visibly. "Good for you, Mr. Crane! I'll do it. We're in for hard times this voyage—lucky thing there's good weather ahead, with everything gone wrong like this! A drink all around, gentlemen. We need it, eh? And I'll have to get up to the bridge now."

The drink was provided, then the three departed. Captain Bray turned in at the chart-house door, Morton and Crane walked aft along the bridge-deck.

"You did it well," said Morton.

"Eh?" Crane looked sideways at him

in the starlight. "Eh? Did what?"

"Why evade? I'm not a fool," said Morton, quietly. "Smithers came down the after ladder, and ran slap into you. The rest was coincidence, but you played it well. Your net has gone tight on Chambers, and no mistake. He can't possibly get his yarn believed by any court. It's the truth, but it's too improbable."

"Hm!" said Crane. "You're that *rara avis*, a well-balanced man with clear vision, my friend! Perhaps you deceive yourself. At any rate, except for you and me being on hand, it would be logged as an accident or direct mutiny, like the death of Saunders. Wouldn't they like to be rid of you, though! Yours is the damning evidence against Chambers, and you're the one who has the stones—presumably. Look out for yourself."

Morton laughed softly. "Dragging me in deeper and deeper, eh? No use, Crane. I'm a detached onlooker."

"The bystander always suffers," said Crane. "Good night."

Morton paced the deck a long while. He thought he understood Crane's whole game now—first Chambers netted, and then Bray! Crane had killed Smithers, beyond doubt. Perhaps the second officer had attacked him, furious, wrought up, blinded to everything. Coincidence or fate had done the rest, and Chambers was in the net, due for a murder charge and a stiff prison sentence at the very least.

"Clever man!" thought Morton. "I wonder how he'll enmesh the skipper?"

He went to the rail, knocked out his pipe, turned to go below. At the third step, the stars rushed at him and the heavens fell.

V

THE *Fei Yen* took a long, smooth roll up the breast of a wave. The body of Morton slid half over the edge, beneath the iron pipe-rail which was not intended to hold back prostrate figures but erect men. Captain Bray grunted, caught his coat, dragged him back, and then bent over him, breathing hoarsely.

After a moment the skipper straightened up, and an oath of astounded incredulity escaped him. He swore violently.

Once more he leaned over, searched the body anew, and broke into fresh curses. What he sought was not here.

Abruptly the skipper turned and rushed away. He did not enter the chart-house, but made for the ladder and went down hurriedly to the deck below. Turning into the passage, he strode to Morton's cabin, switched on the light, and began a swift but thorough search of everything here, from trunk to mattress. He spent a good fifteen minutes at it, prying, poking, testing, and found just nothing.

"I'll be blowed!" he observed, and stared around with bloodshot, baffled eyes. "What's he done with the stuff?"

Another long roll—the sea was mounting, he noticed. His gaze stabbed about the cabin savagely; with an air of helpless futility, he swore again and went back to the passage, and sought his own cabin. There he got out the bottle and poured himself a drink, seized the glass in shaking fingers, drank the liquor.

He caught a sound from the doorway and turned. Crane was standing there, smiling.

Captain Bray opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, wordless. Crane held a pistol, covering him. The skipper's face was slowly drained of its color. Crane



stepped into the cabin, put a hand behind him, closed the door, turned the key in the lock. Then he spoke:

"Sit down, cap'n. Sit down. You didn't get the stuff off Morton, eh? Killed him for nothing. You didn't find it in his cabin, eh? Sit down and talk it over."

Captain Bray put out a hand, felt blindly for his chair, and lowered himself into it. Crane came forward and took the other chair, across the table. His eyes and his pistol did not waver.

"Now, cap'n, looks like you and Mr. Chambers are in the same boat, eh?" observed Crane, no longer smiling. "You lost

your head when you killed Morton. You forgot he's no beachcomber, but a well-known man, a man of standing and position. There'll be stuff in the newspapers about it, and a whale of an inquiry. You can't possibly dodge it."

Captain Bray licked his lips. The whisky was putting color into his cheeks again, but could not put color into his brain. To find that Crane knew everything was worse than staggering—it was paralyzing, held him stupefied. He wakened to the accusation of murder, however.

"It's a lie!" he said thickly. "I—I didn't kill him!"

"You did," said Crane coolly. "You lost your head. Before I could get to him, his body slipped over, slipped under the rail, was gone."

"My lord!" said Captain Bray in a strangled voice. "You—you—"

"Yes, I was watching you," said Crane. "And of course my evidence must go in before the court."

The skipper was more or less himself again, with the first passing of the shock. He broke out harshly.

"Ex-convict like you? Man with your record? Who'd believe it? Your evidence ain't worth a hang!"

"In that case, explain Morton's death—as balanced against my poor evidence," and Crane was smiling now, coldly and terribly. "Convict or not, I was a witness. The man at the wheel knows when you left. Besides, my evidence will be pretty good. It'll show why you killed Morton, skipper. Wang will back it up."

"Wang?" Captain Bray started. "Wang?"

"Exactly. The steward. He took those new life-jackets to Morton's cabin, if you remember, at your order. We'll bring out the whole story of those jewels, and that'll bring out the story behind the jewels—about the French woman and the native woman. What was the French girl's name—Delattre, wasn't it?"

CRANE put away his weapon. He had no further need of it; his words had driven deeper than any bullets could drive.

Captain Bray sat with his hands outspread on the table, and once more his

face had taken on a horrible ghastly expression—dead white about the eyes, and the veins of the cheeks standing out clearly, and the nostrils quivering. It was not fright; it was an incredible and fearful horror at finding these details known to Crane.

"Yes," went on the latter calmly, "there'll be a lot come out at the inquiry, cap'n. If you hadn't let Morton slide over, things might have been patched up, but he's too important a man."

"How—how d'you know about—about—?"

The skipper's voice died on the word.

"Oh, about the native woman and Madame Delattre? Well, cap'n, I know a good deal more than you think I know, even about that! However, it's not to the point just now. Let's go back to the case of Mr. Chambers. You've been dead anxious to figure out some way of logging Mr. Smithers' death so the mate would slide past the inquiry, eh? But it just can't be done. You even wanted to put Morton out of the way, only you were afraid to do it right. And you were afraid Chambers would do it—afraid he would find those jewels, eh? Cap'n, it doesn't pay to be afraid, to do things half-way! If you're not efficient in this poor makeshift world, you sure as hell go under."

CAPTAIN BRAY pulled himself together. His upper lip drew back from his teeth in a snarl, a grimace most unbeautiful.

"What you driving at?" he snapped. "What are you in this for, hey? What's it to you?"

Crane smiled at him amusedly.

"You can worry over that for a while, cap'n. Let's put it this way for the moment—self-preservation! Here you and your chief officer have apparently gone crazy. Mr. Chambers has killed the second engineer and the second mate, and you've murdered a passenger. Lord help you before the court, cap'n! Naturally I mean to protect myself. You don't speak Chinese, cap'n? Well, I do. I learned it in prison, where I learned a lot of things. And let me tell you, this crew of yours has the jumps! They know what's been

going on, never fear. So does Wang, the steward."

"Huh!" Captain Bray grunted, and his fishy, light-blue eyes drove out hard at Crane. "You're no blasted angel. What you want out of it?"

"Ah, now we're getting down to brass tacks!" said Crane, with an air of satisfaction. He produced cheroots, clamped his teeth into one, extended the other. "Here, smoke up, help yourself to a drink! What do I want out of it? Well, never mind that either for the moment. I'm going to get what I want, never fear. Have a drink, and we'll talk it over."

Captain Bray reached out shaky fingers, poured a drink, downed it, and lighted the cheroot. He was recovering, now.

"Get your rough log—still on the table, eh? Well, suppose you enter up this case of Mr. Smithers, just as it happened. You know what store the court sets by the log, cap'n. First thing is to protect yourself."

"But——" Captain Bray hung fire on this. "But—Mr. Chambers——"

"Oh, you mean he'll split on you? Tell about those women and so forth? Nonsense. His word's worth nothing, and if I keep quiet, who'd back him up?"

"Ah!" said Captain Bray, and took up his log and pencil. He crowded forward above the table, writing busily. Crane smoked calmly and watched him. When the skipper looked up, Crane held out his hand, took the log-book, and read over the entry.

"Fair enough," he said.

"Now what?" said the skipper a trifle anxiously. "What about this—this——"

"This affair of Morton?" Crane prompted him. "Well, cap'n, what do you think? Suppose Morton, who is no seaman, was at the rail when a big roll came and tipped him—eh? You grabbed for him, nearly went over yourself, missed him and were knocked silly for a moment. Then it was too late."

"Hm!" The bleary eyes of the skipper searched his face, half suspiciously. "If you'd stand by me—eh?"

"Why not?" Crane waved his hand.

"Don't you see—that'd insure my safety! I take no chances on you, cap'n. You'll

need my testimony. If I swear I was there, saw it all——"

"Wouldn't do," said Captain Bray. "Admiralty courts or any other kind are hell on detail, Crane. Did we stop the engines, put about, do a blessed thing? We



did not. No, that story wouldn't hold. Not that sort of an accident."

Crane smiled. He seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Suicide, then—that happens all the while," he suggested. "If you'd think back, you might recall remarks Morton had made—despondent remarks, wishing it were ended, and so on. Why, I could remember things myself! Only tonight after dinner, he was saying that he wished he were dead, and he'd like to be buried at sea like Mr. Smithers! If he was at the stern rail last we saw of him, and hadn't occupied his berth, and never showed up in the morning but was clean gone—wouldn't that be a clear case of suicide? And no court asking questions."

Captain Bray drew a deep breath, and his eyes glinted.

"By the lord, if you ain't a smart 'un!" he exclaimed briskly. "Here, lemme see that log, now——"

He seized his pencil, opened up the book, and dashed to work. Under date of the following morning he wrote a spirited account of Morton's mysterious disappearance, with a note of the search made, and the various remarks Morton had passed. He read it aloud to Crane, and it was a veritable masterpiece, describing the whole affair clearly, neatly, efficiently.

"How's that, now?" he said genially, looking up, and passed over the log-book.

Crane read it over carefully, and smiled as he read.

"This," he returned, "is excellent, cap'n! It describes everything in fine shape. I

suppose you'd like me to witness it?"

"You'd best," said Captain Bray.

"All right." Crane rose. "I'll just keep the log until tomorrow—look it over a bit tonight. May think of something more to add. Well, good night and pleasant dreams!"

He unlocked the door and passed out.

Ten minutes later, Crane might have been observed—but was not—at the foot of the port ladder on the forward well-deck. He stood there some time in quiet talk with a naked bronzed figure, and finally sought his own cabin. And, as he passed beneath the deck-light in the passage, he was smiling.

VII

MORTON wakened to a rift of sunlight slanting in above his head, and opened his eyes to see Crane dressing. He himself lay not in his own cabin, but in that of Crane. He swung his legs over to the floor and sat up, astonished—then groaned. Blinding swirls of pain stabbed through his head.

"Hello—awake?" came Crane's voice. "Well, sit tight, old chap. You're supposed to be dead. The cap'n has no great remorse over it—confound this razor!"

Now Morton remembered how the heavens had fallen upon him. He sat motionless until the worst of the pain occasioned by his first movements had worn away. He drank in the import of Crane's words slowly enough, but was confused by discovering himself here, not in his own cabin.

"There's a tray waiting for you—I had Wang fetch it," said Crane. "Swallow that coffee and you'll be in better shape to talk business."

Morton found himself still in shirt and trousers, his other garments lying in the rack. He gladly fell to work at the tray and was feeling almost himself by the time Crane finished dressing.

"Suppose you tell me what happened?" he said, leaning back. "Who hit me? Bray?"

"Just so," said Crane. "He thinks you're dead—went overboard. When he learned that I saw the whole thing, he was much disturbed."

Morton's eyes widened. "You—you devil!" he said, and laughed a little. "Only a minute before it happened, I was wondering what sort of a net you'd catch Bray in!"

Crane chuckled. "You do me too much honor, Morton—I've merely taken advantage of circumstances. I'd have spared you this nasty crack on the head if I'd known; as it was, I warned you to watch your step, and I was too slow to intervene when it happened. The ship is being searched for you this minute. Since you're dead, and therefore a detached spectator once more, will you be content to follow my advice?"

Morton, fumbling for pipe and pouch, was slow to respond. Crane was making use of him; he sensed the fact, resented it, yet was powerless to avoid it. He was, momentarily, in no condition to make any use of himself or his faculties—his head throbbed intolerably. The maelstrom of human passions had engulfed him.

"So you've dragged me in, eh?" he said angrily. "No—confound you, that's not fair. I'm to blame for my own fix. Well, I'm in it up to the neck——"

"Exactly," said Crane. "The skipper and Mr. Chambers are in much deeper, however; they're between the millstones of the gods, and are feeling the pinch. You've got to do as I say, trust to me, let me do the whole thing. If I don't suit you, no matter; things have gone too far. Those two men don't dare let you set foot ashore, now! So speak up—time's short. Yes or no?"

"What do you mean to do?" demanded Morton.

"In brief, take command of the ship. The crew will remain passive. They know Chambers has killed two men, they distrust Bray, and they've been told I had master's papers—once. They're safe. Maquorrie will be safe, down below. Yes or no?"

Morton threw up his hands.

"I don't want to, frankly—but I must. Go ahead. What shall I do?"

"Nothing, for half an hour. Then, unless I come back to change directions, come up to the bridge deck. I'll have a chair waiting for you at the top of the port ladder. Think you can make it?"

Morton nodded. Crane glanced at himself in the glass, adjusted his necktie, and went out with an admonition to lock the door behind him, lest anyone try to enter. Morton accomplished it, then lowered himself into his chair, barely repressing a groan, and got his pipe alight.

HE WAS distinctly not in good shape, either physically or mentally. He was confused by this turn of affairs, yet recognized clearly that his own life was now at stake. From the moment when, on the hotel veranda, he shook hands with Crane, he had gradually been drawn further and further by the influx of the maelstrom.

The pain caused by movement ebbed away again. Morton had no idea exactly what Crane intended to do, and did not care particularly. He was by no means in sympathy with either Bray or Chambers—had the best of reasons to lack any sympathy for them—and yet the idea of Crane deliberately killing them repelled him. Still, what was there to do? Nothing. The whole affair was in Crane's hands, and Crane was capable enough. Thus Morton was divided among doubt, perplexity, futility. Also, he felt a certain admiration for Crane, despite everything, and he was curious, very curious in a fascinated way, to see whither the man meant to push his vengeance. Perhaps, after all, he merely meant to take the *Fei Yen* into port and break the two officers—but no! Hardly that. It was not like Crane.

Time was slipping fast. Morton rose, managed a wash, swallowed the dregs of coffee, and went to the door. Every step brought torture at first. Outside, he found the passages empty. The port ladder, Crane had said; Morton headed for it, and emerged blinking into the hot, white morning sunlight.

A knot of men were gathered forward, by the forecastle head, but seemed not to observe him. He turned to the ladder and began to mount. This was work—each upward heave sent throbs over his head, and halfway up he perforce paused. They were looking up at him from below, strange yellow faces in the sunlight. He waved his hand and then went on again, and heard Crane's voice greeting him.

Crane's hand caught him, helped him up.

"Come along—just right, Morton! Settle down and keep quiet, now."

Crane moved off, standing at the bridge rail just before the pilot-house, waiting.

MORTON, sinking into his chair, sighed with relief. He was at the head of the ladder, and the well-deck was outspread below him, the two yellow cargo-booms lashed together over the tarpaulined hatch. The men were still staring up. Then Morton saw a naked bronze figure walking out along the booms and come to a stop. It was the Annamese, Mien.

Mien threw down something across the booms—it looked like a net. In his hand he held a second net, small, far-folded. Watching, Morton remembered that fisherman he had seen on leaving port—Mien stood in just the same stalwart, poised effortless manner. The sense of something impending tugged hard at Morton. He leaned forward, watching for he knew not what, waiting.

Abruptly, the knot of men broke apart. From the forecastle hatch emerged the burly figure of Mr. Chambers, coming out into the sunlight and staring around in his aggressive, menacing way. Mr. Chambers saw the two figures on the bridge; shielding eyes with hand, he stared up at Morton, amazement filling his face.

"I'll be blowed!" he cried out. "Morton! If that ain't him——"

It was so swift, Morton did not see it done—actually saw only a flash of brown limbs on the boom above Mr. Chambers.



Far outspread in a perfect circle, the net dropped and clung all about the mate's huge figure. After it, the naked Mien also dropped, and landed lightly on the

deck.

From Mr. Chambers erupted roaring, furious curses; he lashed out at the net with both hands, kicking at it, strove to rid himself of the clinging, baffling meshes and

only wrapped himself in it more tightly. He stormed oaths and orders, but the impassive yellow men had scattered, and now looked on curiously, silent, without emotion. Mien calmly came in behind him, stooped, struck one hard, arm-long blow across the back of his knees, and Mr. Chambers toppled over.

This was all Mien needed, since the net had fallen from above. The bronze figure moved with agile precision, caught at the net, whipped it in and around and under; then, draw-string in hand, made a leap and swung up astride the boom, hauling taut his catch. It all passed in perhaps fifteen seconds—no more. So swiftly, that Morton scarce realized what he was beholding.

Mien stood up on the boom, then advanced over the hatch, and Mr. Chambers reposed on the hatch-cover, fighting, struggling, cursing, Mien drew in his slack; the native's betel-stained teeth showed black in the sunlight as he grinned. He wrapped the line about the boom, made it fast, Mr. Chambers swung an inch or two above the canvas, unable to get purchase, tangled and held futile by his own weight. Trapped!

Stooping, Mien picked up the second net, folded it, stood immobile as a statue. Mr. Chambers was shouting frantically. At the bridge-rail, Crane stood looking down, and sight of him there was all the crew needed to hold them inactive. Theirs was not the loyalty of white men. They neither knew nor cared what was going on, so long as that calm, dominant figure stood there in control.

"Blast you, hurry up!" came the mate's voice suddenly. "Get me out o' this!"

There was a stir among the men. Morton, watching, saw the figure of Captain Bray cross the well-deck and come to a stop in the sunlight, staring dumbfounded at the queer apparition of Mr. Chambers hanging in a fish-net. Crane spoke for the first time, and his voice drove across and through the curses of the mate.

"Cap'n! Look up here!"

Bray swung around. A startled cry came from him. He shoved back his cap and stood staring open-mouthed at Morton's seated figure.

SWIFTER than eye could follow, the bronze Mien unleashed his net; it was quick as the strike of a coiled snake. Mr. Chambers roared warning, all too late. The net fell, and after it dropped Mien. By design or accident, he struck the skipper in falling, and both went rolling across the deck together.

Mr. Chambers went into frantic convulsions of effort, endeavoring to tear the net apart, flinging out his strength against the yielding meshes, accomplishing nothing except his own utter exhaustion. By the time he quieted, still gasping hoarse oaths, Captain Bray was neatly enmeshed and Mien was leaping back to the boom. The skipper was presently swung into place—the two of them dangling there above the hatch, side by side. Mien leaped down and waved his hand to Crane.

"All right!" he called in French. "All right, M'soo Delattre!"

Crane made his way down to the well-deck.

At this name of Delattre, the two men writhing in their nets gave over struggling, and their voices died away, and over the deck fell a queer deadly silence. Mr. Chambers was nearly upright, and through the net-meshes his face stared out, purpled, eyes distended, mouth gasping. Captain Bray was lying on his side, one hand caught up and held over his head, and he was quite helpless to move. A sharp breath came from him.

"Delattre!"

"Yes, Delattre," said Crane, for a moment invisible to Morton, above. "You gentlemen never knew I was using the name of Delattre, eh? Or that it was my wife who came aboard here in Pak-hoi, eh? You never looked at Delattre—afraid of the fever, eh? Well, you might better have risked the fever, gentlemen. This brown man is the brother of the one you knocked on the head. The native woman was a princess, his mistress. So we're very pleased to check over our accounts with you—after two years."

There was no response from the two netted figures. They stared and stared, wordless, swinging a little to the roll of the ship, twisting very slowly around and around, so that one moment Morton saw

their faces, the next their backs. Mien went up and squatted on the hatch, and was holding a knife in his hand.

Crane came out into the blaze of sunlight and laid the skipper's log book on the hatch, and lighted a cheroot carefully.

"No excuses, gentlemen?" he asked.

"No, it's not much use now—we know the whole story, even a good many of the details. Captain Bray, you honored my wife with your intentions, so I intend to return the compliment. With Mr. Chambers I have no concern—I think Mien will take care of him very handily. Mien knows how the princess disappeared and how his brother was attended to——"

"Blast your dirty heart!" roared out Mr. Chambers violently, "You let me out o' this and I'll show the two of you what's what!"

"You're very well as you are, Mr. Chambers," said Crane, smiling as he spoke. "You don't know that you're already logged by the skipper as having killed Mr. Smithers? Well, you are——"

"Blast the lot of you!" thundered the mate. "What you goin' to do? Leave us here?"

"Why not?" asked Crane.

"For heaven's sake let us out of this!" cried the skipper, his voice stifled. "If you're Crane—Delattre—no matter who you are! Kill us quickly, if you like——"

"Why should I kill you?" asked Crane quietly. "I'd like to, yes; but I don't intend to be so merciful. That is, cap'n, where you're concerned. As to Mr. Chambers, Mien can suit himself, without interference from me."

MIEN guessed what was being said, and threw up his knife and caught it, grinning.

"What's that about me being logged?" demanded Mr. Chambers suddenly.

Crane took up the log book and ruffled the pages.

"Oh, you're down in black and white, but let it pass. Cap'n. I presume you've already noticed that Mr. Morton is very much alive? Yes? You needn't bother wasting any oaths on the inquiry. I'm going to take this ship into Manila for you, then we'll see what the court of inquiry

and the Board of Trade and so forth have to decide as regards our good Cap'n Bray."

Crane paused, shifted his cheroot, and smiled over the book at the agonized skipper.

"You see, cap'n, I was a witness to your assault on Morton. I saved him. The word of a jailbird may not be of much account, but your own testimony is right here, written down in your own hand—understand? You tell about his disappearance and so forth—a beautiful story! Then, we have Morton's testimony. You perceive what the upshot will be?"

A strangled groan burst from Captain Bray.

"You—you devil!" he cried. "You've tricked me——"

"No, fate has tricked you, cap'n," said Crane. "You'll lose your ticket and become a human derelict, a pariah. And you really believe I'd kill you? Not a bit of it. You can go kill yourself if you like, and welcome. I prefer to let you live on, a long while."

Morton, listening to all this, watching from the bridge-rail above, comprehended for the first time how deftly Crane's net had been spun about the wretched man who hung there slowly spinning and swaying. The tough, fine fish-net compressing the body of Captain Bray was as nothing to the invisible, deadly net in which was irremediably tangled all his present and future, his position, his very soul.

Realizing the depth of Crane's bitter vengeance, Morton drew a deep breath and sat back in his chair. It was just. He had no argument against it. He had no share, except to give his plain testimony.

The net which held Mr. Chambers shifted a little, hitched downward—the rope about the boom slipped slightly. Small as was the slip, it was enough to let Mr. Chambers stand on the ball of one foot; the mate straightened himself out, the yielding meshes giving to the thrust of his body. Get free he could not, though he could move somewhat.

"Blast you!" he cried. "What about me, huh?"

Mien rose lithely and came close to the net, grinning, his knife held out as though

to thrust. The mate drew away, as far as might be.



"You belong to him," said Crane casually. "Since you killed the native woman——"

"It's a lie!" roared the mate. She hung herself!"

"The final mesh in the net," said Crane, and smiled.

MORTON heard these words and relaxed. They brought him a sense of finality, as though the drama which he had witnessed was now come to its ending. The final mesh, indeed—confession! He saw Crane turn and look up at him,

Then, like a flesh, the unexpected happened.

Mr. Chambers, one foot on the deck given balance and purchase, gaining some small freedom of action, thrust his arms forward. Undoubtedly, the slipping of the net had aided his efforts. The grinning face and knife of Mien were almost touching him. Unheeding the knife, Mr. Chambers got the bronze throat in his grip—net and all. The knife thrust in; Mr. Chambers clutched the bronze wrist.

"Now, you damned nigger—knife a white man, will you?" growled the mate, and his growl rose to a wild exultant snarl.

Crane whirled about, saw what had happened, and leaped to the hatch-cover. He hurled himself bodily on the two struggling, swaying figures, endeavoring to pull them apart. The net would hold one man, might hold two, but could not hold three. The fiber draw-rope parted. Crane was hurled headlong to the deck; a shudder passed through his body and he lay quiet.

The other two, interlocked, rolled to the deck and across half-way to the port scuppers—a wild scramble of arms and legs, flashing knife, sinuous net. The knife rose, no longer flashing, but dull red, and fell again. The thrashing figures, still fast-gripped, fell quiet, entangled, knotted. The knife was buried, and a red stream twined

across the deck toward the scuppers. The bronze head of Mien was all askew, grinning horribly.

Morton found himself at the rail, staring down.

Then a stir of men in the sunlight, and abruptly the voice of Captain Bray lifted, rang out shrilly.

"Chief! Maquorrie! Lend a hand here——"

Old Maquorrie appeared on the well-deck, a pistol in his hand. Morton saw him peering and blinking, staring at the netted skipper in astonishment.

"How the de'il did ye get there?" he demanded.

"Mutiny! Give me that pistol—cut me loose!" Captain Bray writhed, and swore as his movement made the net swing and slowly spin. "Move—hurry!"

Maquorrie took a step forward. Crane rolled over, put a hand to his head, sat up. The chief lifted his pistol.

"Mr. Maquorrie!"

Morton heard his own voice, vibrant and powerful, fill the well-deck. He saw Maquorrie turn and stare up at him. He saw the glint of yellow faces as the scattered men stared up, saw Crane rise, stagger, stand looking up also.

"Captain Bray nearly murdered me last night, chief," went on Morton. "We've taken the ship away from his control—he's not responsible. Mr. Crane will take her into Manila."

Captain Bray, twisting in the net, screamed hot curses. Mr. Maquorrie stood peering up, jaw fallen.

"Eh, man!" he exclaimed. "Is it a fact?"

Morton saw the sardonic grin on Crane's face, and answered it with a laugh. He himself was full in the net now—drawn into responsibility, acting with Crane, no longer a detached bystander——

"It's a fact, chief," he returned. "The skipper goes to trial."

Mr. Maquorrie shoved the pistol into his pocket.

"I'm damn' glad of it," he said. "I'll go look to them engines——"

The big net holding the doubled, helpless, whimpering skipper slowly spun and swayed in the hot white sunlight, and Crane, looking up, smiled.